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ABSTRACT

The elementary social studies curriculum should be restructured in a way that promotes a broader study of people, places, and events that are distant in space and time. The "Expanding Horizons" framework guides social studies curriculum in New Brunswick, as well as in many other Canadian provinces and the United States. It emphasizes moving from the known to the unknown, and begins with the child's own knowledge, experience, and interests. Because of the impact of technological and social changes during this century, this approach needs to be redefined. The present curriculum does not expand children's experiences, but instead leads to stagnation. Current curricula too often focus on the familiar and fail to promote a global perspective and prepare students for later grades. Present curriculum disregards and stifles children's interest and imagination, rather than utilizing them in teaching. Although cognitive development theory sees formal historical understanding as impossible for most elementary school age children, there has been success in teaching history at this age in France, West Germany, Italy, and Great Britain. At the elementary levels, narrative, literary style instruction can be beneficial in social studies, since it more closely resembles history as children understand it. The use of literature and story telling can work toward the common goals of social studies education that are often limited by traditional textbook use. (AS)

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A PROPOSAL TO REVISE THE ELEMENTARY SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM

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INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, the social studies curriculum has provoked lively debate--on everything from its intended outcomes to the contributions of its component disciplines. The criticisms directed at social studies curricula have done much to clarify our purposes in schooling. Although we remain some distance from any wholesale resolution, the debate is healthy as it forces a close examination of both our educative goals and the procedures we set to achieve them.

This paper takes up one area of the social studies curriculum--the elementary component--and suggests that a restructuring of this area is in order. The revised social studies curriculum would encompass a study of the entire world and would reflect back in time to humanity's earliest accomplishments. A program which includes people, places and events that are distant in space and time is found to benefit its students in two ways. First, a re-examination of fundamental theories regarding child development and a consideration of children's personal interests encourages the view that, if handled judiciously, distant times and lands not only can be introduced to children, but can elicit their interest and responses. The second benefit is that children who are provided with the opportunity to grapple with the most rudimentary forms of historical, geographical, economic, political, and sociological understanding will, in later years, be better prepared to take part in the more abstract analyses called for in high school social studies courses.

The second part of this paper presents the view that the use of literature and story-telling is one very effective way of developing a more broadly-based understanding of cultures that are distant in space or time, which understanding is in keeping with the commonly stated goals of social studies education. Textbook use has often been criticized as limiting both the child's comprehension of subject matter and use of language. Forms of literature, including biography, historical fiction, myths and legends, and travellers' accounts provide an eclectic view of a given time, place or person. Literature also lends itself to a variety of learning activities and can be adapted to suit the needs of individual students.

REDEFINING "EXPANDING HORIZONS"

At present in many Canadian provinces the elementary social studies curriculum is guided by an "Expanding Horizons" framework which is based upon the notion that each child is at the centre of his or her learning. An Expanding Horizons curriculum puts into practice the familiar phrase "move from the known to the unknown," and seeks to widen each child's circle of understanding while constantly referring to the connections between that which is being learned and that which is already known.

The New Brunswick Elementary Social Studies Guide (1987) is a clear example of the Expanding Horizons theory in practice. At the primary levels, children first study

themselves as individuals, family members, and members of the school community. By the third grade they have expanded their outlook to encompass "the larger community" (p. 9). Grade four evokes an understanding of their home province and the fifth grade, after introducing some historical study of New Brunswick, draws the curtains back even further to expose all of Canada. In the sixth grade, children continue their study of Canada, and add to this an examination of some other country. All the while, the theory behind this course of study is that the curriculum should begin with the child's own knowledge, experience and interests.

If our students were members of an isolated, largely rural population--not unlike that found in America during the 1920s and 30s, when the Expanding Horizons curriculum was first developed--then the elementary social studies curriculum might be well suited to the knowledge, experience and interests of its students. However, technological and social changes have had a series of impacts upon generations of people in the Western world in this century. The Expanding Horizons form of curriculum needs to be redefined in light of these.

Children--even very young ones--arrive at school with a vast array of experiences and ideas that were developed elsewhere. The average ten-year-old's experience extends far beyond Canada. It includes a knowledge of remote corners of the globe and of distant patches in time. Their televisions bring them pterodactyls, Guyana and Alexander the Great.

Employment-seeking relatives expose them to Canada's industrial centres and beyond. It is futile to assume that the present social studies curriculum expands many children's experiences. Indeed, many scholars, including Diane Ravitch (1984), agree that a parochial elementary school experience not only ignores students' lives, but leads to intellectual stagnation by suppressing their existing knowledge.

There are other reasons for proposed reforms. To begin with, the current curriculum tends to be rather myopic: it fails to venture beyond the most familiar. Too often Western, English, industrialized nations are selected to represent the rest of the world--Australia is especially popular. It also fails to prepare students for more formal global studies in their later grades. The cultivation of global awareness is considered to be of primary importance in a world of expanding multiculturalism, global economics and international society. Part of the mandate of social studies instruction is to promote a global perspective. Perhaps, though, the greatest fault of the existing program is its disregard of children's interests and imagination.

While educators are so often called upon to harness children's imagination and interests as a resource and guide in teaching, the curriculum at this level denies valuable opportunities to do so. Its dogged pursual of Canadian and (often) Western contemporary studies leaves little room for using the magic that children may have found in their leisure

hours. Kieran Egan (1979) has expressed disappointment in educators who know less about children than do toy manufacturers and television programmers: children are drawn to larger-than-life figures, monsters, alien creatures, remote planets, unfamiliar social orders and cultures, usually engaged in action. Parallel figures and images can be found in historical studies and in the study of truly foreign cultures. Children can become captivated by tales of historical figures, their seeming eccentricities of dress and manner, their exploits and deeds. Similarly, children are frequently fascinated to learn details about the lives of people in remote lands.

To Egan (1979) the sense of wonder that children feel for strange and distant things comes less from any intellectual basis than from their emotions. Egan agrees that the curriculum should begin with the child's interests and experiences, but rejects the idea of defining these through their geographical and temporal closeness. Instead, says Egan, emotional familiarity should be the criteria for selecting content, since this is far more relevant to the children involved.

Theories of child development are frequently cited as proof that children are unable to learn history at the elementary grade levels. Formal historical understanding is thought to be beyond the reach of most children before their high school years commence. Jeanette Coltham (1971), after

examining Piagetian developmental theory, has listed four difficulties in teaching history to children. To begin with, she states that "children cannot experience the past directly; they can meet it only as it exists in remaining evidence. And the ideas of partial and biassed evidence are not simple ones to grasp" (p. 30). Second, Coltham writes that the "evidence with which a study of history is concerned is mainly about the doings of adults . . . There is a sort of generation gap built into the subject" (p. 30). The third difficulty lies in the fact that "language needed to describe the ideas of the subject tends to be at a high level of abstraction" (p. 30). Finally, children are thought to have difficulties in understanding the vast scale of time which the subject uses.

However, the cultivation of formal historical understanding is not necessarily a goal of elementary history instruction--although its development in later grades is thought to be facilitated by early exposure to history. Instead of expecting children to thrash through "partial and biassed evidence" in search of some truth, to grapple with the abstract ideas of adults, using an almost foreign vocabulary, or to make sense of numbers in an unfathomable chronology, elementary level history can have its own, more suitable, goals.

At the elementary level history should instill in children a sense of Egan's "bounds of reality" (1979). This type of understanding does not call for precision or for the

fixing of people and events in time. Linda Levstik (1986a) suggests that at this level "general and imprecise" (p. 72) patterns can be developed in younger students. They can begin "chunking" areas of time together, in a rough sort of chronology. D.G. Watts (1972) writes that "historical response" is possible "as soon as children can conceive of an event having occurred in the past" (p. 87). This type of understanding can suffice for students of elementary level history, and will commence the process of understanding abstract elements such as chronology, which take years to comprehend. John Poster (1973), writing about historical thinking, states that "a sense of history requires more than clock time; it requires a sense of existing in the past as well as the present, a feeling of being in history rather than standing apart from it" (p. 589). Egan (1986) suggests that the narrative aspect of history be promoted with younger students. Stories are more likely to convey causal relationships and generally do more to illustrate human behaviour, connecting children with history.

Likening history instruction to that of literature raises doubts about the applicability of Piagetian developmental theory in limiting the history curriculum to more mature levels. Piaget's model of cognitive development was based on descriptions of children engaged in learning mathematics and science. To some (Levstik, 1986a) history, since it more closely resembles literary instruction at the elementary

levels should not be judged akin to mathematics and science, which subjects require disparate types of thought. Levstik (1986a) compares early history instruction to exposure to children's literature. Many teachers feel that good readers have early exposure to literature and are given books to read long before they can decode the text or undertake a formal analysis of it. She notes the absence of a similarly early exposure to history for children: "During the years when social studies emphasizes the 'here and now,' children's literary interests involve the distant and fantastic" (p. 73).

The goals of history instruction can, then, be reassessed in consideration of the interests and abilities of children at the elementary levels. Instead of imposing precise chronological terms upon students, history lessons might seek to develop an awareness of "long, long ago" and "a little while ago," or to foster some sense of the existence of past societies or cultures and of the experiences of those within them. Children should come to recognize that their ancestors were vital beings, with whom they still retain a connection. Before the more complex and abstract topics of history can be tackled, these basic elements must be introduced. In this way, elementary history instruction serves a precursory purpose.

Whereas history can respond effectively to children's need to know what happened long, long ago, geography at this level should explain what happens far, far away. This type of instruction, too, need not mimic its more mature sibling:

elementary level geography should promote a general approach to the study of foreign cultures, the physical environments within which man functions, and the natural conditions that affect humanity. This generalism is an apt precursor to more formal and detailed studies found in social geography, physical geography, or earth sciences in later years. A general approach to elementary level geography also argues against focusing upon formal map and globe skills, delaying their inclusion to more senior years. Rather than concentrating on learning about longitude and latitude, children should be directed toward an understanding of the vastness and inherent diversity of a planet that must be divided with imaginary lines in order to be described.

CURRENT PRACTICE IN BRITAIN AND EUROPE

The idea of teaching history to children in elementary grades is not a new one. In France, West Germany, Italy and Britain, early instruction in history is thought to be a component of successful schooling. More recently, the History Social Science Framework of the California State Department of Education has adopted plans to commence history instruction in the lower grades. The Bradley Commission on History in (American) schools also advocates such curricula.

French children are schooled within a humanist orientation. In history classes this has led to generalism in content matter (Springer, 1969). West German grade six

children learn few hard facts through history instruction. Narratives are used to "lay the groundwork for an understanding of concepts, . . . a sense of historical time and an interest in the colourful past" (Springer, 1969, p. 82). Students visit local historical relics to make clearer the links between historical events and their environments, thereby personalizing history somewhat. West Germany shares with France and Italy a humanist orientation which encourages generalism and a lessened dependence upon chronology. Italian schools, in their sixth year history curriculum, focus upon time from antiquity to the beginning of the Middle Ages.

Britain's middle schools instruct children aged eight to thirteen years. Traditionally, the syllabus is roughly chronological: the earlier grades study primitive man and subject matter moves forward in time as the grades progress. Local history is generally saved until the later middle years (11+). The reasoning for this is that later years and more abstract historical questions require a basis of familiarity. In order to commence thinking about more abstract questions related to sociology, politics or economics, children need some earlier introduction to the general place and time. When teaching history or geography to younger middle-school children, stories are one pedagogical tool frequently employed.

British educators seem unafraid to introduce remote subjects to young children. Classical studies is indirectly addressed at the primary levels, and has grown considerably at

the middle levels since the creation of the Cambridge Schools Classics Project in the early 1970s. By the upper elementary level, British children also have some familiarity with Biblical themes. At the primary level, children read the Bible for familiar topics:

> homes and families, schools and games, sheep and shepherds, clothes and jewellery, wells and water, houses and furniture, corn and bread, trades and professions, learning and working, highways and journeys, Bible lands, the Bible library, the Bible translated into many languages, and how people have been influenced by the Bible (Schools Council, 1972, pp. 63-64).

It is interesting to note that there has been a resurgence of support for Biblical studies in North American schools also. Once shunned in an effort to avoid religious indoctrination in schools, Bible stories are now being reintroduced within social studies curricula. They evoke an understanding of the bases of Judeo-Christian culture. Combined with stories from the Koran and parables from Buddhist or Hindu faiths, Bible stories can commence the development of global awareness and understanding.

The British Schools Council seems to use Piagetian developmental theory as a series of guides to instruction, rather than as a series of constraints over instruction. Whereas Canadian and American educators point to Piaget as evidence that children cannot comprehend history during their elementary years, British educators interpret the theory in a more positive way. Jeanette Coltham (1971), mentioned earlier as having deduced four difficulties for history teaching based

on theory, also provides a number of recommendations to enable educators to overcome these difficulties.

It is most important, states Coltham, that teachers concentrate upon their children's experiences in history classes. She suggests that a wide variety of teaching methods be employed. The Schools Council (1972), following Coltham's advice, describes how children should visit museums, hear guest speakers, and be visually stimulated through art, architecture, films and photographs. They should encounter the daily aspects of life in past and distant times and places.

The tradition of early history instruction in European schools should not be viewed as mere empty convention. According to Wayne Dumas and William B. Lee (1985), French schools adopted a less discipline-based history-geography-social studies curriculum in 1969. The new approach--Activités d'éveil (Awareness Activities)--was intended to be a more flexible and problem-centered type of program. However, by the 1980s history teachers at upper level grades were pointing to a complete lack of preparedness on the part of their students. The removal of history at the lower grades had had a profound effect upon that discipline at all levels. Given the choice of modifying the advanced level curriculum so that it was eased to suit the abilities of its students, or renewing a concentration on history at the lower grades, the French government chose the latter in the mid 1980s.

THE BENEFITS OF LITERATURE AND STORYTELLING

So far, this paper has concentrated upon the teaching of history and geography at the elementary level. However, the broader goals of this instruction lie within a program which we call social studies. Social studies education at the elementary level serves a myriad of purposes. Most evident to an observer is the children's learning of basic facts and skills that are principally related to history and geography. However, students' success in learning the bases of history and geography are an empty achievement within a social studies curriculum unless these facts and skills are used as part of a comprehensive study of humanity, its social organizations, its cultural differences, its needs and resources, and its future survival.

Given this condition, many educators question the effectiveness of current pedagogy in social studies, at both the elementary and secondary levels. They find that textbooks --so central to most curricula--often fail to foster the depth of understanding that is essential in the achievement of social studies goals. They have turned instead to literary works and storytelling, and find that these approaches to social studies are far more evocative and satisfying, especially when used beyond the primary levels. Based on a survey of recent writing concerning literature and social studies, this section will outline how some of the achievable goals of elementary level social studies are better met with a literary or narrative-

based approach.

Social studies can be described as a holistic program: its total is equal to more than the sum of its component parts. That is, although social studies is founded upon the disciplines of history, geography, religious studies, economics, political science and anthropology, it is not merely a collection and arrangement of these. The difference between sum and total lies in the idea that social studies instruction should generate certain attitudes and habits that are deemed relevant to some predetermined purpose, usually good citizenship.

Thus, as John Hoge (1988) writes, such subjects as history must be made to seem real, rather than abstract. History is used in social studies to develop the child's knowledge of national heritage and to "recognize and place in historical context important persons of the past, and introduce and gradually build understanding of time and chronology" (Hoge, 1988, p. 1). However, children in elementary classes have rarely developed the ability to think formally about history. Nevertheless, they are able to learn historical facts and "use the lessons of history to explore important values and develop skills in studying thinking and communicating" (Hoge, 1988, p. 1).

Kieran Egan suggests that it is very difficult for children to grasp the conceptual terms embraced in all of social studies. Their understanding depends upon "slow

experience" (1986, p. 66) which should include the complex of nuances included in such concepts as community, equality and freedom. Tway and White suggest that literature is a "time-honored extender of experience" (Tway and White, 1988, p. 179), since fictional stories are composed of events, values, places, intentions, and individual people and groups. These elements, in turn, are the content of social studies (Egan, 1986).

Dianne Common (1986) finds that "through stories, information about social studies matters exists not as independent, factual and conceptual bits, but is locked into a context of human intentions and activities" (Common, 1986, p. 246). Egan, too, suggests that storytelling is a method of reducing the complex concepts of social studies to a form in which children may better grasp them, and yet avoid a trivialized handling of them (Egan, 1986). Storytelling and fiction also allow children a variety of perspectives from which to view other cultures, times or places (Tway and White, 1988, p. 185). Further, stories have been used as powerful instructional tools for millennia. Indeed, the discipline of history has, arguably, narrative as its origin (Common, 1986, p. 246). Humanity's need to know of its origins has only recently--and incompletely--been administered to by the formal discipline of history. Earliest historians carried the stories of their ancestors: they did not conduct clinical analyses of them. Even modern-day historians refer to literature to round out their students' understanding. Thus, history is linked to

storytelling at two points. Its origins are tied to the needs of members of predominantly oral cultures. The formalization of history removed, in part, its association with storytelling. This removal, in a sense, de-humanized history. In order to make history comprehensible to children, storytelling and fiction are indispensable, as they humanize history, stressing the "human implications of historical events" (Freeman and Levstik, 1988, p. 332). In fact, Linda Levstik's research has found that the "connected discourse" (1986b, p. 2) of biography and historical fiction develops an interest in studying history through more formal sources.

For the children involved, storytelling and fiction are of value for a number of reasons. To begin with, stories cater well to children's abilities and limitations. "While the concept of 'nation' may not be well developed in young children, the concept of 'other peoples' begins to take shape" (Tway and White, 1988, p. 180). Similarly, while "430 BC" may remain a mystery, children can grasp "long, long ago." Stories enable children to begin pushing back the bounds of their world, so that it begins to reflect the expanse of their imagination. In this way, stories can encourage children to take up more formal studies, and discover the universe of reality. Consider the profound impact that Homeric stories of Mycenae and Troy had upon the life of Heinrich Schliemann--and subsequent knowledge of Greek antiquity.

Joan Aiken (1985) writes that stories are our only means of acquiring an "imaginative grasp of the past" (p. 75) which truly conveys what life was like at any given time. To Charlotte Huck (1979), children feel very strongly about identifying with the lives of real people and with events "that really happened," thus explaining the success of biographical narratives. Biography also gives children models to emulate, and with which to feel some connection. It is this connection that makes stories so valuable in social studies instruction. Stories appeal directly to children's imaginations, and can be "so powerful that students enter imaginatively into the past" (Freeman and Levstik, 1988, p. 329). Accumulating information about the time and place described in a story then becomes an easy task. So, too, is the fostering of cross-cultural understanding facilitated (Tway and White, 1988, p. 180). Perhaps the basis of stories' appeal in social studies lies in the notion that stories convey poetic, or intuitive, truths rather than intellectual truths. These are more subtly placed and yet become entrenched within the minds of children. To Freeman and Levstik (1988), this is because stories present information "in a subjective form that is closer to the way in which young children explain themselves and understand the world" (p. 330).

The Florida Department of Education (1979) has conducted studies which compare text-based social studies instruction to that which employs children's literature. They have found that

textbooks are no longer adequate, since they cater only to average reading levels, and seem to become dated almost as soon as they are printed. Instead, children's literature offers a timeless and diverse source of understanding. Literature also lends "drama and reality to many areas that might otherwise be mundane or abstract," since it involves spiritual and aesthetic qualities. Finally, by encouraging each child to reach his own conclusions, children's stories can increase enthusiasm for both literature and social studies.

Literature can be used in the social studies classroom in a number of ways. Children can read books of their choice, at their own pace. However, simple storytelling should not be overlooked once children have completed the primary grades. Aside from the simple benefits of learning to listen, storytelling can bring a class together in an atmosphere that is intimate, relaxing, and conducive to learning.

B. De Lin Du Bois and M. McIntosh (1986) claim that high school teachers who read aloud to students will "help students comprehend the content covered by developing their concepts of history and by increasing their vocabulary; aid students in understanding the format of their textbooks; improve students' language and speaking skills; increase students' motivation to read; and affect students' social attitudes" (p. 210). Surely these benefits are also felt when teachers read to elementary students.

Joan Aiken argues that teachers and students should use literature for "lateral sleuthing" (Aiken, 1985, p. 75): reading T.H. White's funny description of King Pellinore and Sir Grummore engaged in joust, to comprehend "the awful weight and awkwardness that must have handicapped a knight in full armour, the ponderousness of their horses, the narrowness of their blinkered vision" (Aiken, 1985, p.80); or to grasp the tantalizing details of everyday life in past centuries, through the works of such writers as Jane Austen and Charles Dickens. Aiken also points to the eventual dovetailing of people, places and events as children read more. Before long, characters and events encountered in one work are reintroduced in another. At the same time, each handling reveals some slight--or great--difference of opinion. Such discrepancies can only enlighten. Indeed, part of the task of elementary social studies should be to build a tolerance for ambiguity, as a precursor to developing critical thinking in later years.

Dianne Common (1986) writes that literature is an ideal means of encouraging moral education. Our values are not best found in dates, maps, or charts, but in our artistic forms. Since an important aspect of social studies is moral development, we would be unwise to ignore literature in the curriculum.

Publishers have begun to promote biographical works about women and members of ethnic minorities. This trend will elicit a more rounded and accurate impression of the qualities that we

associate with human greatness. Materials about ethnic minorities are being used widely to foster racial tolerance, cultural acceptance and global awareness.

The ideas of post-structuralist literary theory may also be of service when using literature in social studies classrooms. In an attempt to "avoid both a false objectivity and a false subjectivity" (McCormick, K. et al., 1987, p. 44), post-structuralists invite active readings of literature in social studies by concentrating upon the repertoires of both the texts and the readers. General repertoires include the cultural, historical and linguistic influences which are reflected in interpretations of a text. Literary repertoires involve literary matters such as genre, plot, and point of view. A literature-based social studies course may elicit more thoughtful and meaningful responses if it examines the general and literary repertoires of both the texts and the readers.

Children's literature in elementary social studies, then, is of value for a variety of reasons. To begin with, the factual material of social studies is, in fiction, embedded within a text that is lively, stimulating, and more in keeping with the ways in which children view the world and process new information. Fiction also cultivates children's awareness of the complex nature of humanity; of individual differences, varying perspectives and the disparate interpretations of events in our world. Knowledge of these complexities is a first step toward achieving global understanding. Storytelling

is a particularly effective way of using fiction. It can be less intimidating than solitary work, is a unifying and pleasant activity for the class, and hones children's ability to listen and reflect while using their imaginative capacities.

We can use a rather broad definition of literature for use in social studies education. Trade books, designed especially for use in elementary classrooms, are perhaps the most readily usable and available texts. It may, however, be difficult to find trade books which provide the range of experiences sought in social studies. There is a paucity of such works dealing with genuinely foreign cultures. Thus, alternate sources should be sought. The tales, myths, and legends of the world can do much to draw distinctions between cultures and indicate global similarities. Children should be encouraged to study the drama of foreign lands, to read the diaries and letters of historical figures, and to study their lives through biographies. Biblical stories can be read as an introduction to Judeo-Christian thought. The goal of this type of instruction should be to develop as broad and far-reaching a comprehension of the world as possible.

CONCLUSION

The present scope and sequence of elementary social studies in Canada is largely determined by the Expanding Horizons pedagogical framework. This guiding structure, while well-intentioned, is faulty in that it is not truly based upon

the experiences, needs and interests of children approaching the twenty-first century. Rather than selecting content on the basis of children's emotions and their experiences in life, simple spatial and temporal proximity has become the main criteria for inclusion. Thus, schooling not only ignores invaluable opportunities to teach, but also succeeds in quashing the fascination many children feel when thinking of distant times and places.

The advantages of moving beyond provincial and Canadian studies at these levels are many. Clearly, the most rudimentary forms of historical and geographical study can begin in elementary school, to improve learning in these areas at the upper grades. Children can obtain an early--and timely --sense of global awareness. Such studies can also harness and maintain children's own fascination with exotica, and develop this into a deeper understanding of foreign cultures.

Within this endeavour, the use of literature is of benefit, since it comes closer to describing events and places as children comprehend them. Textbooks too often fail to maintain the interest of their audience. Literature also manages to connect the topics of social studies to the humans that experience them. Children can share in this connection.

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